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SUBJECT: IRANIAN AND AFGHAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY: A SNAPSHOT
FROM VAN

REF: A) ISTANBUL 145 B) ISTANBUL 416 C) ISTANBUL 438

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: We met October 8-10 with UNHCR, provincial, municipal, and police officials, an NGO, and Iranian Baha'i families in Van province in southeast Turkey, to look at conditions facing Iranian refugees. Van hosts between 1700 and 2100 registered refugees, mostly Iranian and Afghan. Some paid up to \$1200 each to be smuggled into Turkey. Iranian refugees are a mix of religious and political refugees, the latter primarily members of Kurdish, communist, or Monarchist parties. UNHCR accepted 56 percent of asylum applications in 2007. Turkish authorities claim to provide social services to all needy refugees but the NGO and refugees we spoke to said otherwise. Baha'i refugees described systematic persecution by Iranian authorities including harassment, detention, and denial of access to education and employment. Baha'is are usually resettled to US, Canada, or Australia within a year, while political refugees remain in Turkey an average of four years and sometimes up to ten.

12. (C) Summary, continued: Several interlocutors admitted Iran puts pressure on Turkey to send back "sensitive" political refugees but insisted Turkey rejects such pressure. Turkish police described being overstretched by growing numbers and limited resources. They are worried Afghan refugees numbers will increase further, claiming Iran is pushing them into Turkey to "punish" the GOT for supporting sanctions on Iran and/or deploying with NATO in Afghanistan. Comment: Both UNHCR and local authorities in Van appear committed to meeting refugee-related obligations in the face of limited resources, growing numbers of refugees, and poor cooperation with each other. Iran's role in pushing Afghan refugees into Turkey (and its role in the actual smuggling thereof) bears closer scrutiny, which Mission Turkey will pursue. End Summary and comment.

Visiting Van

13. (C) Consulate General Istanbul "Iran Watcher," ConGen consular officer, and Embassy Ankara Refugee Officer traveled to Van province in southeast Turkey (150 kilometers from Iran, 200 kilometers from Iraq) October 8-10 and met with UNHCR officials, the Deputy Governor, Deputy Mayor, a women's advocacy NGO, police officials, and several Iranian Baha'i refugee families, to look at conditions confronting Iranian refugees before and after entering Turkey. ConGenOffs and Emboff were accompanied at almost all times by a local security detail.

Meeting with UNHCR Van

14. (C) UNHCR Van protection officers Xhemil Shahu and Mahmut Kacan explained that their office (with seven total staff), operating in Van since 1997, covers all refugees in Van and the neighboring provinces of Hakkari and Agri. UNHCR Van has a caseload of 1700 registered refugees (1600 in Van), and Shahu speculated that Van hosts thousands more unregistered refugees. Asylum seekers entering Turkey irregularly must register with local authorities in the province where they entered and with the nearest UNHCR office. Refugees entering through airports or regular land border checkpoints may register with UNHCR Ankara. All refugees are then assigned by police to live in "satellite cities" in central Anatolia, such as Kayseri (ref A) or Van. Within three to six months of registration with UNHCR-Van, UNHCR interviews them to determine whether they qualify for refugee status, a process that takes a matter of days to weeks, though UNHCR expedites decision-making for sensitive cases (Shahu cited a recent case involving a former Iranian intelligence official as one example).

15. (C) In 2007, UNHCR accepted 56 percent of refugee applications after the first interview. Rejected applicants may appeal the decision or file subsequent "sur place" claims rooted in new bases of persecution, most often conversion to Christianity while in Turkey. Refugees who entered through Van are then required to live there until a third country approves them for resettlement. Shahu told us that only the United States, Canada, and Australia are currently accepting Iranian refugees from Turkey; while Finland accepted some Iranian refugees in the past, it has not done so in 2008. Religious refugees such as Baha'is and Christians are

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resettled the fastest, sometimes within a year, in part due to USG willingness to accept such refugees on a fast-tracked basis. Political refugee cases can take much longer - many wait in Turkey for years, while some more problematic cases, such as MEK (Peoples Mujahedeen of Iran) members and other Iranians who enter Turkey after residing in Iraq, are never accepted by a third country for resettlement.

16. (C) Deportations: Asked whether Turkey respects refugee status granted by UNHCR, Shahu said yes but offered several notable exceptions. He was aware of five cases in 2007 of Turkey deporting registered Iranian refugees back to Iran. He cited a recent case of 24 Uzbeks who held UNHCR refugee certificates and had been living in Van the past year, who were deported in September to Iran, where they had been living the previous six years (having been granted refugee status there by UNHCR in Tehran). His fear is that Iran will not allow them to re-register as refugees, and instead may send them to Uzbekistan where they face the risk of persecution for their past political activities there. (Comment: Some members of that group, according to Shahu, had a relative in Turkey pay \$5000 to an Iranian smuggler to bring them back into Turkey a few days later.) Shahu also cited the case of an Iranian family in Hakkari province who were sent back to Iran in September, though because they were not detained in Iran they simply made their way back to Turkey several days later and registered with UNHCR directly in Ankara, where they remain. Shahu acknowledged that "It is not always clear why Turkey deports refugees. It is usually a decision made by the Ministry of Interior, which does not share its reasons with UNHCR." Shahu also cited a case in July where the GOT tried to deport two MEK members to Iran but Iran refused to accept them at the border, stating that they couldn't be Iranians since they spoke Arabic. They remain in custody in Turkey.

17. (C) Iranian political refugees: UNHCR staff explained that most non-religious Iranian refugees claim to be members of ethnic or political opposition parties in Iran. A majority of such applicants claim membership in the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). Smaller numbers claim membership in Iran's monarchist, communist and Marxist

parties (Tudeh, the Communist Party of Iran, and the Worker's Communist Party of Iran), as well as some student leaders and human rights activists not affiliated with a party. Among the 44 percent of refugee applicants rejected by UNHCR last year were many KDPI and other opposition party supporters, who could not prove they were actual card-carrying party members or could not show UNHCR they were at risk of persecution merely because of their participation in non-violent activities like handing out leaflets or chatting on the internet.

18. (C) Assistance to refugees: UNHCR provides one-time assistance to the "neediest" refugees, usually a \$100 payment, not enough to cover the approximately \$400 annual residency permit charged all refugees by local authorities. (Refugees are not permitted to depart Turkey for onward resettlement until the residency fee has been paid.) UNHCR presses Van authorities to help meet refugees' humanitarian needs by providing basic necessities like coal, blankets, food, water, and medical care, but such assistance is inconsistent. Shahu said NGOs such as the Red Crescent also help, but that conditions facing refugees in Turkey are still difficult, as refugees are not allowed to work and must find and pay for their own housing. The European Commission has offered funding to build a center in Van to house refugees in a central location, and the Van municipality has provided property, but construction has not yet started. Van authorities refuse to break ground on the preliminary infrastructure projects (a road out to the site, electricity, water and sewage systems) until the EC provides the money for construction of the facility itself.

19. (C) The Afghan problem: Shahu told us that the majority of refugee cases he now faces are Afghans. The week before our visit, 251 Afghans showed up at UNHCR Van in one day alone. Most refugees entering Turkey illegally do so with the help of smugglers. According to Shahu, the current rate smugglers are charging for entry from Afghanistan to Iran is \$600 per person, and \$1200 for entry into Turkey from Iran. "For people as poor as these, that is a huge price to pay to get to Turkey. I wonder where they get this money," he pondered. Despite the association with smugglers, Shahu assessed that the refugee population in Van was not a significant source of crime, as refugees in Van tend to "lay low and keep to themselves."

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Van authorities downplay the refugee issue

110. (C) Van Deputy Governor Ozmer Ozcan told us that Van authorities try to coordinate closely with their Iranian neighbors on common issues of concern, noting that Van's Governor meets every three months with the Governor of Iran's Western Azerbaijan province. Ozcan admitted that refugees pose a resource challenge to Van, but he assured us that Van's social security administration gives assistance to the "neediest" refugees, a determination it makes by requiring refugees to apply via bureaucratic process, with paperwork is exclusively in Turkish. Social security officials then ask the refugees' neighbors whether the refugees are truly needy. Ozcan defended the practice of charging refugees a residency fee, claiming it helps offset the social services they receive and the processing required for local police to perform what is essentially a parallel process to UNHCR's refugee status determination. He told us that Iran sometimes asks Turkey to send back sensitive Iranian refugees, but asserted that Turkey is committed to its Geneva Convention obligations to protect refugees. He said the refugees are not involved in serious crime but many are involved in black market trading and working illegally. Some get involved in drugs, especially those whose refugee applications are rejected by UNHCR, and usually end up staying long-term in Turkey.

¶11. (C) Ozcan confirmed Van province is working with the EC on the planned refugee center, indicating that the province will pay for infrastructure (wiring, utilities), though Ozcan himself has concerns about the center, including that it would force refugees from different countries, cultures and religions to live together, potentially causing conflicts. Ozcan told us his office was not responsible for border control with Iran; he was unaware of a border cooperation agreement signed between Iran and Turkey during Iranian President Ahmadinejad's August visit to Istanbul (ref C).

¶12. (C) Ozcan downplayed Van's commercial links with Iran, telling us that the primary highways from Iran go through Hakkari and Agri provinces, not Van. He described a main railway line from Iran that stops at Lake Van, but said the train was not used by Iranian traders to bring goods into Turkey, so Iranian products are not sold in as much volume in Van as they are in Hakkari and Agri provinces. Ozcan further claimed that very few Iranian companies are registered to do business in Van, but many Van-based companies (small and medium enterprises) sell goods over the border in Iran.

¶13. (C) Van Deputy Mayor Abdullah Calim dismissed our questions about Iranian refugees with the assertion that "all are welcome in Van; there are no problems here." He claimed Van provides all basic necessities and social services to its refugee population. He estimated Van's official population at about 300,000, but told us the municipality probably had up to 620,000 residents because of migration from surrounding Turkish villages. Calim described at length his support for beautification projects throughout the city (e.g., getting rid of "sign anarchy," moving street vendors to bazaars outside the town center, planting flowers, making sure every neighborhood has a public funeral home), but was unwilling to discuss the resources that the city of Van actually devotes to refugee needs.

Difficult conditions facing refugees

¶14. (C) We met with the assistant director of the Van Women's Center (VAKAD), a 15-person NGO that runs three shelters for at-risk women, offering a total of 20 beds for the most at-risk refugee women and children for up to two months (longer in special cases.) She said Van authorities no longer give any help to refugees. VAKAD receives small grants from several EU countries and support from NGOs like Amnesty International, but gets no help from local authorities. Most refugees at VAKAD's shelter are Afghan and Iranian; most are fleeing domestic violence; or a husband died and the family tried to force them to marry a brother; or they came to Turkey to escape religious or ethnic persecution. She confirmed that if a refugee feels threatened VAKAD petitions police for protection, but the police do not always accept petitions. In that case, VAKAD helps the women seek UNHCR assistance to transfer to another city. (VAKAD successfully petitioned Van authorities to transfer the entire gay, lesbian and transsexual Iranian refugee community from Van to Kayseri and Eskisehir because of their problematic relations with conservative locals in

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Van.) To empower the refugees, VAKAD tries to teach them skills like sewing that would make them employable on the gray market. Even so, she confirmed that many refugees still turn to drugs and prostitution.

¶15. (C) We met several Iranian Baha'i refugees at one refugee's home. The Baha'i refugees included a single 30-year old from Karaj, a young married couple from Tehran and Esfahan, and a 40-something mother of three children from Tehran. They described constant, pervasive persecution in Iran from both the Iranian government and from residents and co-workers because of their conversion to Baha'ism. Sharing

experiences similar to those we heard from Baha'i refugees in Kayseri (ref A), they explained that once neighbors and co-workers realized they were Baha'i they were threatened and ostracized. Some family members dropped contact with them, and work became impossible. One refugee reconfirmed that Baha'i (in this case in Karaj) are actively prevented from teaching or practice their faith, or from assembling in groups. They felt that pressure on Baha'i had increased as a result of an Iranian Majles decision in December 2007 to publish a revised penal code that requires the death penalty for "apostasy," a term the GOI applies to the Baha'i. One of the refugees knew personally the seven Baha'i community leaders arrested and imprisoned in Iran in March and May, noting that the Iranian government's claims in the press that the group have admitted spying for Israel probably means they have been tortured and may yet be executed.

¶16. (C) The Baha'i refugees agreed that while far preferable to staying in Iran, life as a refugee in Van is hard. They said they receive no support from authorities, and confirmed that refugees must pay a significant residency permit fee which most cannot afford. One refugee estimated that some 650 Iranian Baha'i (including 10 children under 12) are currently living in Van. All the refugees we spoke to have family or friends in the U.S., which has helped them get "fast-tracked" for resettlement to the US, facilitated by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC, see ref B). They welcomed statements of support issued by the U.S., EU, UN, and others that put a spotlight on Iran's systematic persecution of Baha'is, saying it sometimes eases the pressure, temporarily. One refugee also urged an international campaign to specifically press Iran to allow Iranian Baha'i members to opt out of obligatory military service, given Baha'ism's commitment to non-violence.

Touching a nerve with Van's police

¶17. (C) We concluded our travel by meeting with Van's Deputy Security Chief Salih Bayazit and Chief of Van's "Foreigners Police" Guven Seker. Seker rejected UNHCR's estimate of 1700 registered refugees in Van, claiming the true figure was over 2100 and increasing daily, especially with the recent arrivals of large groups of Afghans. Seker said Van now faces over 400 refugees arriving every month, calling it a serious and growing problem. He criticized UNHCR Van's "poor record keeping" and disorganization (comment: raising questions about the extent of cooperation between the two offices). He said many of the new Afghan arrivals have been refugees in Iran for 10-15 years, but Iran is now pushing them on to Turkey to "punish Turkey" for deploying troops under NATO command in Afghanistan. "The Iranians are using the refugees to play politics with us." Seker said the rise in Afghan refugees is also leading to a rise in smuggling, with some smuggling even "supported by a few Iranian officials."

¶18. (C) Van police hold border coordination meetings with Iranian counterparts to avoid conflicts at the border, Seker told us. "We have the oldest border agreement in the world and we work hard to keep it safe." He said Turkey and Iran cooperate against Kurdish (PJAK and PKK) terrorism, as well as against drug and people smuggling. But Seker groused that Iran sometimes claims that Turkey "is not doing enough on our side to stop the smuggling going eastward!" He agreed that Iran sometimes asks Van police to return specific political refugees, but asserted that Van police accept their Geneva Convention obligation to allow refugees to stay in place. "We are obliged to keep them and protect them, unless they are doing something bad here, in which case we send them to third countries, not back to Iran."

¶19. (C) Resource burden: "Compare Van to Finland: We have 2100 refugees, Finland has 1500. We take more refugees than Italy, Greece, or Hungary. We are doing everything we can, but we need more international help." Seker reiterated that

Iran is "using Turkey to play games. America and other countries pressure Iran, but Turkey has to pay the bill." He admitted that Van security force resources are strained by having to deal with refugees. He described Van police officers feeding refugees out of their own kitchens, taking up collections to pay for refugees' medical exams, and even paying refugees, overdue residency fees to allow them to leave Turkey for onward resettlement.

120. (C) We need more help: Seker warned that increasing numbers of Afghan refugees could include Al-Qaeda or Taliban members. "Helping us stop this new wave would help your own security." We reminded Seker of active US-Turkey cooperation on fingerprint-sharing, on drug and WMD detection at Turkey's borders, and on anti-smuggling. Seker told us Turkey already takes ten-point fingerprints of every incoming refugee, but data collection and processing is hampered by limited budgets. Seker said Van's "Foreigners Police" department, with only 23 officers, needs need more equipment to control the border. "We know how to control borders better than you do -- you can't stop illegal immigration from Mexico " but we lack hi-tech equipment to protect Van's long (comment: 237 km) border with Iran."

121. (C) We explained that we were not criticizing local authorities' refugee-assistance efforts, only gathering facts about conditions on the ground. We underscored that the U.S. took 2700 refugees from Turkey last year. Seker countered that USG "only takes the easy ones: the Baha'i, the families. The bad ones stay in Turkey." He reconfirmed that the average stay of an asylum seeker in Turkey is three years, with some here waiting for resettlement up to nine years, and that Turkey hosts over 25,000 long-term refugees. Closing the meeting, Seker again pleaded for "the same level of cooperation and assistance on refugees as you give us on counter-narcotics. It's part of the same problem."

Van atmospherics

122. (C) Atmospherics: We found our interlocutors to be relaxed and friendly (with the exception of the overworked police officers), reflecting a surprisingly open atmosphere throughout Van. Police presence on the street was minimal, there was no noticeable tension stemming from the previous week's PKK attack against a police outpost in nearby Hakkari province, and travel around the city -- including the occasional moment when we excused ourselves from our police escort -- was easy. The only clear cultural indication that we were closer to Iran, Iraq and Syria than to Ankara or Istanbul was when we attended a local soccer match and witnessed team officials sacrificing a sheep as a pre-game ceremony, with players from both teams wiping the blood on their uniforms for good luck -- and noticed that the only women among the hundreds of spectators were the two in our own delegation.

Comments

123. (C) Both UNHCR and local authorities in Van appear committed to meeting refugee-related obligations in the face of limited resources, growing numbers of refugees, pressure from Iran, and poor cooperation with each other. Conditions for refugees in Turkey are difficult, with no legal right to earn income during what is for most a several-year stay. Indeed, we were surprised that Iranian refugees are not a larger source of crime or social tension in Van; most of them appear to endure the hardship while largely staying out of trouble with the authorities. Embassy Ankara and ConGen Istanbul will continue to raise our concerns with GOT interlocutors, however, regarding the occasional cases of UNHCR-registered refugees whom the GOT deports or sends to

third countries. We will also continue to press the GOT bilaterally and at the OSCE to stop requiring refugees in Turkey to pay a residency fee.

¶24. (C) Iran's role in pushing its Afghan refugees into Turkey (and even in facilitating the smuggling thereof), which some Van officials claimed reflected a decision by Iran to punish Turkey, bears closer scrutiny. We will continue to examine this issue on future Iran- and refugee-related reporting.

WIENER